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A Grenade of Paper Flowers: A Collection of Poems

Melissa Dugan

University of South Carolina - Columbia

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A GRENADE OF PAPER FLOWERS: A COLLECTION OF POEMS

By

Melissa Dugan

Bachelor of Arts
The Pennsylvania State University, 2001

Master of Arts
Holy Family University, 2004

Master of Arts
Villanova University, 2012

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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University of South Carolina

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Accepted by:

Samuel Amadon, Director of Thesis

Fred Dings, Reader

Nikky Finney, Reader

Ed Madden, Reader

Matt Kisner, Reader

Lacy Ford, Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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ABSTRACT

A Grenade of Paper Flowers is a collection of poems of varying forms, styles, and lengths that explores the themes of love, identity, sexuality, violence, and constructed meaning.

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IMMANENT DOMAIN

A map of love is not love.

Through wandering homeless and directionless, I have come to Centralia, the land that devours.

Some of the recorded dangers of using an inaccurate map, or of having sub-par map-reading skills: immortalization via tar pit, operatic mermaids, strip malls with two or more coffee shops, squinting strangers with twirl-able mustaches, quicksand, produce stands with signs that insist the word “potato” ends with the letter *e*, and cannibalism.

Once you’ve eaten a half-thawed burrito out of a supermarket dumpster, you begin to equate following a map with playing a game of Twister by yourself. When you’re starving, *delicious* is the same as *available*.

A zip code joins a swath of earth with the realm of consciousness. The US Postal Service stripped Centralia of her zip code. Hot steam laced with carbon monoxide cannot exist in this country, especially because it does.

My hair has started falling out, and I still haven’t found anyone to love. But maybe my problem is a lack of definition. And maybe my problem is choosing to forget that fire can feed for hundreds of years on the poison we breed under the ground.

You can ignore maps. You can batter street signs with a croquet mallet. You can live somewhere for years and not know where in the world you are. Though I’m not sure any of these tactics would bring you any closer to knowing where love is.

I mean clumps of hair, all the time. I just rake them out and leave them in little nest-templates in the grass, on the roadside, dangling from trees and bushes: my donations to homeless bird-families.

I ate a map once, back in the days when they still had physical forms. I was trying to make a point about spontaneity.

The absence of a map of love does not grant you an unobstructed view of the golden-cloudy-transcendent experience of love. Or how to get there.

There. To love, I mean. Because it’s not here.

PUBLIC SAFETY

A kiss obliterates the world with a grenade
of paper flowers. Letters creep across
a frozen space and lie to make you think
one shot of screen can say it all. Advice
is yellow tape and chalk outlines: *Go slow
or postal, with the flow, glacial, a lark
of condiment, miscreant, or never-sent.
Mount Everest requires bottled oxygen
and gradual ascent. Plan ahead and know
your audience, their sins, the forecast,
your own psychological distress. Awareness
is cleanliness is godliness is good sense.
Yes, safety can be measured by the gap
between knees and the ends of your skirt.*

COLLECTION

Who wouldn't covet an elephant tusk tipped with platinum?
 A teakettle, a pair of stockings, a flattering looking-glass?

 A chorus of descriptions, infinitude holding sway,
 upending all the anthracite. Bluish maggots, tinted like poor

 pewter, slacklining in the light; gray-singed moss; mosquitoes
 sticking past flicking; nights of cricket-talk rhythmic

 as the workday. Who wouldn't want everything to have its place?
 To collect enough to settle into rocking chairs whistling

 on silvery tobacco-wraiths? All are welcome, all abide, unhappiness
 is none of our concern. The gods with their painted faces

 crouched in fairy-tales, in places homeless poets prearranged
 to layer with slippery veils, to lord above and shadow

 a stark landscape. Those who belong understand gray
 smeared on sides of hands. We are not impressed

 or pressed, save for time and good job prospects.
 Death still wears heather driving gloves—ever the elitist—

 patient, polite, seamless, as only the highborn can be.
 We are all the laboring class in his lifelong factory.

 The secret-keepers are suspect, the negligent in personal
 upkeep, those who do not dream of *plucked* and *swept*.

 Why let go of what you can corrupt? Here's a pill for five
 more years, to delay the end that slices and disperses

 all the parts we assemble to make ourselves whole. We convey
 our forms across cinereal sofas and their dappled pillows,

let our progeny surround us as the label maker heats up.
Our belongings will marshal a war with our absence.

MY THIRTY-KILOMETER KINGDOM

My eye started slipping,
 snatching folds of flesh
 in my cheek in an effort to keep its place,
 but still slipping,
 until it fell flat into the middle
 of the side of my face.
 Nerve endings snapped,
 and my lids became shrouds
 over an unseeing
 pancake-eye.
 Not even the blind men will pay me now.

Funny to think of the victory
 in hoarding bodies like metal scraps,
 scooping up the pieces others couldn't use
 and being able to use them for precisely that reason.
 I want to say I was drugged the entire time
 I want to say

The leopard, toothless, glassy-eyed,
 hips moving like a turbine.
 The monkeys in rainbow-striped vests.
 The mule that knocked all of Elsa's teeth out
 after he mounted her.

My fingers don't bend the same way.
 Sometimes I don't even know I've been drooling
 until I notice my shirt is wet.

I do not live in your world.
 I never stepped over the invisible line.
 I melted. I transformed. I eat three-eyed fish.

I sleep in abandoned houses,
and in dreams I am suffocated
by the weight of a thousand men
all with cardboard eyes,
these my cardboard men,
I cut them out in endless lines,
generic shapes holding hands,

and I can breathe again.

VOLKER WOLKSTAFF'S WALTZ

I. Rise

Only child, twice compressed,
 swelled into books like stags
 on mountains, kingly dressed,
 but on earth, lord of rags,

chicken-bone-stealer, child
 of the Weimar mess, raised
 up buck-toothed and stockpiled
 by mandates of the crazed.

The tune's off, the cancer
 new. Little Volker tried
 soda pop to answer
 the maggots his friends pried

from Blitz-blind eyes. Stolen
 sweet in lieu of decay.
 High-class perfume mulling
 the certainty of gray.

Tearing home to his folks,
 found absent, fresh-shorn
 far away, by the hoax
 of men and states reborn,

he fed on rats and trash,
 twisted the necks of tikes
 like bottle caps, and thrashed
 a small girl for her bike

to ride to Saxony.
 Here come the marching boys,
 here come the faculty,
 the wind-up magic toys

of erudition. Foe
Volker, please mind the gap
between *white* and snow,
words luring you to lap

some rum-honeyed pizzazz.
Know your tongue tasted first
all that US jazz,
all that improvised thirst.

II. Fall

How long can someone dance
before his feet tableau?
Of tendons lost to prance,
is there a last to blow?

Dr. Wolkstaff, master
of organized crime, wields
a map of disaster
in each dollar he yields.

In all the dashed-through fields,
mowed-down-past-the-skin heads,
disease-defying shields,
a man still grows old, treads

ahead for more bread, sour
as an olive, a branch
too far from the bower,
a kiss from avalanche.

BEFORE THE ASYLUM

She steps from the carriage with creamy boot,
 angled neck, angelic cheek, all slanted couth.
 A New York gentry bride in Pennsylvania woods,
 a dream of frothy, beaded *maybes* and *oh, yes-I-coulds*.

She dances with feet that teach the music, with lips
 painted and slightly parted. She taps, she flips,
 she shimmies her body almost out of its own reach.
 The tea she sips with pinky poised is jasmine peach,

the best straight from China, imported by her wealthy
 uncle in Boise. He's an eccentric man with a healthy
 interest in tambourine-wielding toy bears—which
 he collects, ostensibly, for his son. Not a stitch

of her dress strays from the form. She married
 her husband for his beard and the way he parried
 with a fencing foil. She thought the country sounded
 romantic, but there is no one here to be astounded

by her many baroque tinkerings: the watercolor
 lilies, the showy Scarlatti, the gold-embroidered collar.
 Her father yodels. Her mother sews life-sized dolls.
 Her sister built a to-scale train model of Sioux Falls.

Her husband works at the town's only law office.
 Alone during the days, she sifts through halls and closets,
 rearranging rooms, organizing drawers, writing letters
 in calligraphy conscious of itself, not of the page's fetters.

Before sturdy slippers slide over hospital socks, before dust
 dulls the cloth petals on her new felt hat, in August,
 she will compose a sonnet to the President, drink quinine
 each night to ease leg cramps. Accomplishments will refine

a woman until she is transparent, until her husband
can see her only when he is asleep. She hopes, canned
in flower arranging, that the constant blooming will
enthrall someone, if not he who accepts her skill

with a godly patience beyond thrill. All of her songs
are marionettes. He watches the strings. She longs
to remove her bathing costume, to step bare into the depths
with an audience captive behind her, holding its breath.

FAILURES

I.

Here is what I have been trying to say:
Leaves do not glow,
but in the sunlight, they flicker.

II.

Your eyes are eggs.
I crack and swallow goo
laced with salmonella,

crumple the shells to puzzle
pieces in my hands
by rubbing them against

your cheek, laugh at the
gleaming protein (imitation tears)
and at your empty sockets.

III.

Rows of butterflies
Pinned to paper
Preserved behind glass
Mounted on walls

IV.

You lose weight.
I hang you
like a coat from the hook.

I cannot wear you
for protection.
My own body has tripled in size.

Hips spill over themselves,
breasts cause my body to tip forward,
like a ship with all of its passengers crowded on one side.

V.

Your eyes are the yoke around my neck
by which you keep me plowing.

VI.

We were there, the two of us against the world,
and we were flattened, our bones broken
and submerged together, gaze forever linked by
the intertwining threads of our disengaged eyes.

VII.

You want the coffin made
before the first sign of fever,
and every time my hand slips,
the nail strips—

VIII.

A tornado loomed, gathering
cows and windmills and dilapidated sheds.

I could hear it but not outrun it, so I did not
change my pace. Occasionally, I glanced

over my shoulder. Miniscule whirling particles
forced me to squeeze shut my eyes.

IX.

The mastodon in the antique shop
sends out crystal shard sprays
with its ship-sized sways.

Too large to feel the soft press of porcelain
against my fatty hip, I shed your unwelcome yoke.
Stock-still, panting, I take inventory of my surroundings.

X.

You are too slim and compressed.
Also broken-hearted, you say,
but I have no fingers.

I would grow them if I could,
if I could ever master
a seamstress's small, deft

movements, but I only know
how to lower my head
and charge.

Here is your chance to run away.

STACY STANDHOPE¹

1.4.6.1

*When I brained my son with the glass blender,
I cannot imagine that I was myself.*

Stacy Standhope's Perfect and Simple Identity:
The Mother who Killed her Son
in Self-Defense

1.4.6.2

Eggshells line Stacy's pockets.
She moves in a straight, jagged line, edges
blurring like desiccating leaves.

An hour ago, she wailed for an hour. Her voice just died.
Yesterday, she raked leaves through
the mud the mounds of mud the gutted roadside.
Her arms still have a pink ache
that is not the white-edged red of yesterday
or the forgotten salmon-turquoise of tomorrow.
In three years Stacy will live in a place where the leaves do not fall.

1.4.6.3

*The night before you broke
all of our wooden furniture,
I had an out-of-body experience—
what some people call a dream.*

¹ The structure and content of this piece follow "Of personal identity," Section 6 of Part 4: *Of the sceptical and other systems of philosophy* from David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature*.

*I ascended like steam, clung
to the corners, stuck there like smoke.
But whose eyes watched
my closed eyelids
restraining dunked eyeballs,
bobbing against the surface?*

1.4.6.4

(We do not have even the most distant notion of the place where these scenes are represented, or of the materials of which the theater is composed.)²

Act One

arms swelled

bent at the elbows
scooped up
like a bundle of sand

laughter
a rabid terrier speeding out of an open gate
nose trembling in the unfamiliar air

Act Two

wrinkling the wind lights dim skin retracts ears crammed with screaming

a business of breathing toothless mouth, strong lips soap, something green
just beneath the grass

a warm weight in the arms eyes with a color that lies skull with a soft spot

nipples grown fat and hard

Act Three

The light
pure shadows
the light
light
speckle shakes speckle shakes
the light
thump, ring-clatter, shifting, scraping, scratch-scratch-scratch, thump

² *Ibid.*

“Mom, we’re out of peanut butter.”

1.4.6.5

Personal Identity as Regards Our Thought or Imagination

Stacy Standhope is a unique woman. There is no one quite like her. From the beginning, there was something about Stacy, a certain goodness, a strength of character no one could replicate. Stacy has a way of doing things, a flair in the way she arranges flowers, a particular care she takes with her hair, a close-lipped smile, a voice that resonates from some uncanny inner wellspring of warmth. Stacy can think on her feet and keep her cool in a crisis. Stacy is brave and strong and smart and loving. Stacy works hard for other people, especially her son, because it is within her nature to care deeply for others. Stacy Standhope is a good person.

Stacy has honey-colored hair.
Stacy is a single mother.
Stacy is an accountant.
Stacy is good with numbers.
Stacy plays tennis.
Stacy has a tendency to spill coffee on her shirt.

Personal Identity as Regards Our Passions or the Concern We Take in Ourselves

You came at me with a knife. I defended myself.

1.4.6.6

When he was born, Steven Standhope weighed seven pounds, eight ounces, and he was twenty inches long. On the day he died at the age of seventeen, he was five-feet-eight inches tall, and he weighed 125 pounds. Over the course of the three months prior to his death, he’d lost a total of thirty-five pounds.

1.4.6.7

There was a regular succession of events. Stacy made Steven three meals a day, every day, for seventeen years, three months, and eighteen days, even when he stopped showing up to eat them.

1.4.6.8

a vase of lilies on the kitchen counter,
crystal, littered with prisms,
a bee alights on a lavender petal,
crawls his way inside

1.4.6.9

“Stacy is not a violent person! Not at all, not once, not even a little!” Stacy’s sister pauses. “Well...she did slap me one time, when we were kids. I stole one of her dolls, one with black hair and all of these silvery streaks like tinsel in it. I took it and hid it under my bed, and when she asked me if I’d seen it, I lied and said I hadn’t. But I took it out and played with it when I thought she was downstairs, and I didn’t notice her coming into the room behind me. She screamed, like actually screamed, and struck me across the face, so hard my nose started to bleed. I dropped the doll.”

1.4.6.10

*A stomach that rocked when I was still,
I almost lost a tooth,
Forty pounds, an elephant-hill—
a mountain hardly makes a difference—
I kept what I still had to give away
fluttering, not mine, kick,
a kick inside, not mine,
a rippling under my own skin*

1.4.6.11

Stacy Standhope's Common End or Purpose:
Provide for my son.

Wake up in the morning (provide for my son). After washing and dressing, (provide for my son) set out the boxes of cereal, the milk, the bowls and spoons (provide for my son). If he does not come downstairs by 6:15 (provide for my son), slip into his room to wake him. His room (provide for my son) is always a mess, clothes strewn everywhere. He has been taught how to do his own laundry (provide for my son), but he never does it right, so I just (provide for my son) do it for him.

1.4.6.12

**Painted on the Prison Cell Wall by a Woman Who Slowly Poisoned her Husband
to Death over the Course of Four Years**

We are born without teeth.
Not that these teeth are made
by us and then pressed into our mouths.
Not that we are born with them,
ready to eat and to defend.
We are born without them.
Then they come, on their own, later.

1.4.6.14

A mother has certain expectations for her son:

Kingdom: Animalia

As long as he has all of his fingers and toes, I will be happy.

Phylum: Anthropoda

He should be walking around the age of one. Wobbly legs orbit his toes before each foot thrusts forward. He will be an athlete.

Subphylum: Uniramia

He learns to say “No,” and says it even when he doesn’t mean it. I yell at him and hope he will stop. “No-no-no-no-no-no!” he wails, banging the wooden spoon against the back of the car seat. He will be a leader.

Class: Insecta

He swings the plastic bat. His entire body whirls. The ball, only tapped, bounces to the earth. He will be a professional baseball player.

Order: Hymenoptera

The book spread open on our laps. His finger follows the words. “Hop on Pop,” he reads with his eyes narrow under tight lids. He will be a famous writer.

Suborder: Apocrita

“The girls all love him at school,” the teacher says. “They follow him around, and he kisses them if they give him the snacks from their lunches.” He will be a politician.

Superfamily: Apoidea

He snorts up the blood gushing from his nose. The other boy is still crying and rubbing his fists against his eyes. “I can’t see,” the other boy moans. My son is strong.

Family: Apidae

My son has stopped speaking to me. He slouches and buries his chin in his neck when I ask him about school. I have to call his school to get a copy of his report card. He has a “D” in every class. When I confront him, he says, “I won’t fail. I know how much I need to do to pass. Stop worrying. It’s all crap anyway.”

Subfamily: Apinae

“Where have you been all night?” I ask him. “It’s almost dawn. Why didn’t you call? You’re supposed to call. I was so worried. I thought you were dead. I expected you to come home hours ago.”

Tribe: Apini

When I open the door, I find my son under the covers in his bed with two girls. I don’t recognize either of them. One girl has a tattoo of a butterfly’s wings on her forehead. My son turns to look at me and then kisses the butterfly girl full on the mouth.

Genus: Apis

My son puts a lock on his bedroom door without telling me. It can only be opened with a key I don’t have, and he won’t give it to me. I have to call a locksmith. The locksmith tells me he sees this kind of thing all of the time.

Subgenus: Apis

My son has a skull instead of a face. There is a gap in his mouth, another missing tooth. He can’t keep his fingers still as he eats. My son is a stranger to me.

Species: A. mellifera

He asks for money, and I refuse to give it to him. He’ll just use it to buy drugs, but what am I supposed to do? A mother is supposed to take care of her son.

1.4.6.15

“Your whole world changes when you become a mother,” Stacy says to her sister. She smiles down at Steven, coos at him, and wriggles her pointer finger inside his tiny fist.

Her sister shrugs. “I’d make a terrible mother. I can barely take care of myself.” The bracelets on her arms clink together, sliding up and down as she fluffs her hair.

“But that changes when you have a child. And you just suddenly find yourself doing what you’d never thought you’d do. You become a completely different person.” Stacy winks and smiles at her son.

“What if I don’t want to become a completely different person?”

“I don’t know. You just do. It just happens.”

1.4.6.16

Resemblance

“Mom!”

Clang! Tinkling, mixed with crashing of metal weight jostling in a wooden drawer. Chaos tipped with sweet—like toddlers wielding church hand bells.

“Mom!”

Contiguity

Steven close, bent over the drawer, shoulders hunched. Baggy gray T-shirt. Hair oily at the tips. Rotten banana smell of old sneakers. Muttering under his breath, a spray of sound fading in and out.

“Steven, what is it? What are you doing?”

Causation

“Steven, honey, please calm down.” Conjunction of salty taste with the act of her tongue brushing her upper lip.

He dumps the silverware drawer out onto the floor, a shiny spill catching the light, a crowd of sounds.

Clang. Oily. Rotten. Salty. Shiny.

1.4.6.17

I only stopped hitting him when he slipped and bashed his head against the counter.

1.4.6.18

*I dreamt I finally got what I'd always wanted
and snaked my way inside your mind, felt what
you felt when you held my hand, saw my face
replicated in your memory a thousand times.*

I felt your leg kick outside of my body.

1.4.6.19

Stacy's son snuggles up against her in sleep.

His first word—*Ma*.

Sunlight-eyes when taking his first steps.

Kisses. “Again.” Kisses.

“Mommy, why did my hermit crab crawl out of his shell?”

Screaming. All night. Screaming. Purple-red face. Gums red at the top, lighter pink at the edges, where the teeth are breaking through.

Stacy cringes from her own son as he walks past her.

Finishing the last part of their round, her son's voice bellows alone: "Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream!"

Watching television, folded into each other on the sofa.

1.4.6.20

Every time I turn the knob, the door opens.

When the clouds gather, the rain comes.

When I kiss my son on the cheek, he smiles.

When I flicked the switch, there was light. I turn on the lights.

I reach my hand out and press my fingers against the surface of the table. My flesh momentarily conforms to the grain of the wood, but does not melt into it.

I lean over the lilies and draw in breath, and a sweet smell fills my nostrils. I remember the smell.

I remember. I.

1.4.6.21

Stacy Standhope is a mother.

Steven Standhope is a son.

A mother is Stacy Standhope.

A son is Steven Standhope.

A mother is a son. Stacy Standhope is Steven Standhope.

Steven Standhope is a mother. Stacy Standhope is a son.

StevenStandhopeStacyStandhope.

standstacyhopestevenhopestand

dapsyaveetasdphotosntehncntesp

1.4.6.23

We have now fully explained the nature of our judgment and understanding.³

1.4.6.22

Stacy Standhope stands beside her son's grave. Her sister is with her. It's a day in early May after weeks of rain, so the air is clean, and the sunlight has a pleasant sting.

Her sister takes Stacy's hand. "Everyone knows it wasn't your fault, Stacy. You were a good mother. Please tell me you know that."

Her sister clears her throat and swings her arm slightly, rocking her hand and Stacy's hand together, unified in a pendulum, like the girls used to do when they were children. She squeezes Stacy's fingers.

Even though they are still touching, her sister feels like Stacy Standhope is not there beside her.

³ *Ibid.*

TO MY CHILDREN

You would have been tall at an early age,
graceless, gangly, dreamy, with oily skin,
fond of chatter, too hungry to be thin.
You would have sung, stumbling across the stage
and trained your pens to clear the virgin page.
Or you could have been the athletes who win
all games and never need braces, who pin
prizes neatly on framed corkboard to cage
your good fortune.

I try to sell this blank
to a man with a picture in his head,
but his eyes scan the room. *Barren* is not
the right word anymore, but let's be frank:
I am the death of his future. I've bled
for nothing. Dreams that matter must be wrought.

AN ADOPTION PROPOSAL

Dear Sir,

I need two young girls, four or five years old—
or younger—orphaned and without a soul
in the world to care for them, girls to hold
and free. I will raise them to run like foals
allowed to trample at their own heart-rates,
like fish who tear through nets and eat the bait.

True, I am only a young man, a student
at Oxford, but I am wealthy; the rent
will be made. My girls will not be subject
to gray gruel and stale bread—they will object
to having less than the most barbaric
hunk of roasted suckling pig. No cleric

will sully their minds with prayer before bed.
These women today, demure creatures bred
like monkeys with iron collars around
their necks, chains hooked into hallowed ground,
they cannot even turn their heads. We will
set fires where leaves are too brittle and still.

Women ought to be tornadoes, to be
comets, to blaze, to dishevel, to key
the music of the world to their own tune.
My questing girls and I will map the moon.
Exploring Nature with our inmost selves,
we will swim along continental shelves.

We will be the Earth's geology: pink
and gold veins to inspire men to chink
into the colorless. We will recite
Latin and the oxides of hematite.
We will eclipse Faust, never owing
souls that dam the mind's overflowing.

-Percy Bysshe Shelley

THE SPLIT-SECOND LOVE AFFAIR WITH SENSATIONALISM THAT
SEIZES YOU ON THE PRECIPICE, JUST BEFORE THE MOMENT OF
THE FALL

Individual Human Experience File #2234-78.4B: The following is a report of the thoughts of a Mrs. Ophelia Riley (1964-2012) at the moment she discovered that her daughter Kayley was a serial killer. Video file available at #2234-78.4C/XI.

I smacked the dead girl

to wipe her body out of the world,
or jar those flat eyes back into rotation.
Life is a kind of spinning,
somewhere in the loops starts the seeing.

Thirty-two years before I found that door.

Kayley's drooping right eyelid—
 God
 smeared His
 massive finger
 hoping to erase
 before the clay dried

Unfinished eyes watching me.

"What're you doing today, Ma?"

*Sometimes, deep in the summers,
A sweetness, thick, everywhere inside my face—
Like fertilizer or garbage left in the sun,
Gagging, my nose over-aroused,
Squishing my nostrils together,
Can't stop smelling—*

"Stop nagging, Ma.
I'll take out the trash."

When did life get so slippery?
I used to have a handle on things:

*Up at five, feed the cats, Kayley's breakfast, my breakfast, diner by six, scold the girls—
those girls, never the same girls for long, always chomping on gum on gossip on
snatchings from the kitchen*

*I can't breathe her purple and yellow face like one of those mall makeovers gone wrong
braided rope choker lipstick applied I can't breathe by a drunken abstract artist in the
backseat of a racecar*

Teeth digging into my lip,
flavor of perfume and candlewax,
salt with an aftertaste of iron.

*"I shot the Wendy-bird!" eight-year-old
Kayley proclaimed.
She crowed along with Peter Pan
Even when she wasn't supposed to,
Voice spewing into the air
In a geyser of roaring lost boy.*

*Afterwards, breathless, almost straight-eyed:
"Did you hear me, Ma? Did you hear me?"*

I think I recognize some trace of
someone I knew in the static
just above her mannequin-skin.
Those girls.

*Kayley sleeping, the soft curve of her fist
Just a breath away from her Cupid lips,
Even now, decades after she'd stopped
Sucking her thumb.*

WHAT THE DAUGHTER DOES, THE MOTHER DID

I slouched my way into someone else,
 not much of a damsel in distress.
 My parents staggering and spooning
 through the dramas of late adolescence.

Not much. Of a damsel in distress?
That's a myth, my grand-mom said.
 Through the dramas of late adolescence,
 I talked to myself as I galloped, trying to fly.

That's a myth, my grand-mom said.
A game, but not of chance—of bullshit.
 I talked to myself as I galloped. Trying to fly
 the dirtiest jokes, the bad words replaced,

a game, but not. Of chance. Of bullshit.
 I would sit on the bar stool, rattle the peanuts.
 The dirtiest jokes, the bad words replaced,
 funny only when my father told them.

I would sit on the bar stool, rattle the peanuts
 in their dish to find the saltiest bits.
 Funny only when my father told them:
What the daughter does, the mother did.

In their dish to find the saltiest bits,
 long-eyed women forgot their children, forgot
 what the daughter does, the mother did.
 I was trying to learn algebra and biology.

Long-eyed women forgot their children forgot.
 My smile was friendly, but my breasts were cunning.
 I was trying to learn algebra and biology
 to say things I didn't understand.

My smile was friendly. But my breasts were. Cunning
men were prone to listen. My body appeared
to say things I didn't understand.
The cashier groped me by the potted ferns.

Men were prone. To listen, my body appeared.
Greasy and cough-syrup-high,
the cashier groped me by the potted ferns.
I slouched my way into someone else.

ARS POETICA, OR PORTRAIT OF AN ANGLER FISH

I wanted to draw you in close,
 so I sacrificed my beauty to a migraine,
 and she burst from my forehead,
 my new appendage, a neon globe

embedded in a flesh-stick.
 The darkness here is thick;
 it will reconstruct your bones,
 but I am ready to absorb you,

to merge our blood vessels.
 I will feed you. I do not give
 off light in order to see.
 This is my secret: I can see

only in the dark. The light is for you,
 and behind it, I am the shadow,
 and the teeth, and the darkness,
 and the juices. The light—my

bacteria—they breed for you.
 I do not need to speak
 to be here, waiting, colorless,
 with coins for eyes. The light

that is mine is not mine: we
 have an arrangement, as I do
 with six males whose digestive
 tracts have dissolved.

I take what I need from them
 when I need it. When the eggs
 come, they will not be pretty,
 and I will forget them the moment

my children slip from my body.
But one day you will be swimming
near the bottom of the trench,
and you will witness

a divine glow. In that moment
I hope you will believe the ocean
has swallowed a star so hot
it never ceases to burn.

THE ABSENT BRIDE

Between two whitewashed slats
an orb orbits itself,

reflecting light like a pool of tar.
The dress didn't agree with her

skin. There was a vowel forgotten
in the back of her mouth.

The dress forced her to unsheathe
Velociraptor shoulder blades.

The groom whistled in the shower,
ballads, patriotic songs.

His dried face glowed pink,
rubbed fresh, prickly.

Sprigs of hair just above the knuckles.
Her lips hover; her breath

runs. So incomplete, she
wanted to push herself into his hands.

The pockmarked man
had flower-eyes, amber

coronas blooming around
a center of nothing.

Her arms unraveled in the dancing.
She loved him. Can you understand

that she loved him? Her legs
just couldn't communicate in those heels.

Winter makes the blood
brittle. The naked light bulb

swinging back and forth,
the animal-shadows.

He rubs his crown.

THREE ROMANTIC LEADS

1. *Jasmine, the Woman of Loose Morals*

She swelled gray and moon-rim-eyed
 and could not find toadstools or
 trappings meat-thick and slick,
 kept slipping on linoleum floors
 in windowless rooms, kept hooking
 fingers in slats that wouldn't
 give, kept not getting, not keeping,
 weeping to the dissolution of skin
 into air. Invisibility has weight,
 rubber arms that do not move.
 Not every master is unkind.
 She called them *masters*
 for her own pleasure.
 She didn't want to know
 the man who branded his
 initials into the small of her back
 was another woman's
 administrative assistant.
 Stilettos applaud
 when you're passing
 through an alley alone.

2. *Bella, the Virgin*

She sleeps surrounded by
 printed bouquets of wildflowers
 that look like grinning cat faces
 when she un-focuses her eyes,
 when the full moon undresses
 the wallpaper. The vampire
 in the story scuttled across
 her backyard like a vest
 of rib-bones or a rake over dirt
 or tin cans tied to a bumper.

A silent clattering in the play
of light and shadow. Even in
her nightmares, he never reaches
her room, is forever crawling
across the runway strips
of mown gold-tinged grass,
the crumpled horror her order
was meant to gleam against.

3. *Ariel, the Sadist*

Good girls free the horses.
They mend old curtains to mark
their territory with paisley and butterscotch.
They watch other people's babies.
A change comes. They swell prettily
into monstrosity. They dip white
cloths in warm water to dab
on blood-crusts cheeks.
She rapped her knuckles across his teeth.
Somehow, when she wears a dress,
she never manages to become a cloud.
She cannot forget her sweat.
The leeches in the bowl are pregnant
with red leaking pink in paint-
from-paintbrush whorls,
smoke in the world without air.
Her body does not belong there.
She dries snakeskins in the sun to crackling,
to sweat-soaked pantyhose, stiff
as cockroach shells, wings,
like lewd tongues, flickering.

EROTIC FIXATION: THE PURPLE TEDDY

Suffered by Father Paul Connor, the Killer-Priest

A fedora, a sling-shot, a pair
of binoculars, a wanton woman
chemise-clad, wet chest lined with her
other lover's rubbed-off curls, her eyes
pinged out. What possessed him to strip

and filch is not as curious as what
made him mend and dress, under
vestments and black-and-white,
in the lingerie of his murdered proselyte.
Something trimmed about his fingers,

plucking and prim, tidying the scratch
of lace against hair-smattered skin.
Her smell, long dimmed by washings,
a trace of *hmm* in the threads slipping.
He could fit the whole teddy in his mouth

without choking, just disappearing.
The body of Christ, the frantic bells,
vibrations along his unmentionables,
purple polyester, a poor woman's satin,
more decadent than untranslated Latin.

PROSPECTUS

The scorpion in his boot
was a husk before it met his toe.
The dust never settles;

it swirls over the earth
like a colored poison gas.
His lungs explode in dreams

of flash floods. There are towns
he can never return to. There
are whores who would claim him,

but he has no bastards. A new century
looms, and he has not made his
fortune. He hovers over creek beds.

There are eight months left.
His brother rises up from the earth;
there is dirt caked in-between his

brother's eyelashes. The dead have
moon-eyes and rattlesnake-voices.
Death is senseless. A man can

move through the world
without looking behind or
ahead. He can swallow bones.

Sometimes there are weeks
of silence. The horse is hollow,
her hooves creak with orange rust.

The hawk's wings, catching air
so close to his ears, bring sound
back like breath after drowning.

The desert imitates the bottom
of the ocean in an anemic
montage. Everything is waiting

to split. He spits tobacco.
There are sixteen days left.
When the century ends,

he will buy himself a
velvet vest and a saloon.
Or he will raise goats

in the mountains. A man
has options. A man can forget.
A man's arm extends as far as

a bullet. The towns all have
swinging doors. Nothing stays
closed. He stops to remember

why he wanders. There are
four days left. He spits tobacco.
His brother had a white patch

of hair on the back of his head
shaped like Durango, or like
a pressed daisy. He shouldn't

have taken that mule. Men
have died for less. He will die
someday in a trench across the sea.

But for now, he has
sun-smoked skin and crow's
feet deep as ravines. For now,

he is a prospector. He knows
how to dig a grave he'll never
find again. There is one second left.

FANTASIA

I.

A brawny gnome yodeled to me.
His head was rust-colored nautilus shells.
His voice fondled my brain stem.
My legs seceded, flags imprinted
with Vs clutched in-between their toes.

II.

If the Universe had a memory, when
and where would it be? Nets spat out
across the sea are never dragged back
to the same place, even if they are empty.
Eyes plucked out of a head cannot see.

III.

Is it my fault the boys are so fair?
I've never wanted to say *No* in my life.
Poseidon gifted me with a flying horse,
so I flew away. Sea nymphs swaddled the god
in foam while I untied the knots of gravity.

IV.

I auditioned to be a mermaid,
but my belly poked too far over
the top of my fishy half. I have the body
of a sea witch, but not enough of
the brine, so now I count conchs.

V.

The kraken had an erection, so what
was I supposed to do? The howling
feng-shuied Scylla and Charybdis.
Afterwards, he snored bubbles in my
lap, tentacles twitching with pursuit.

VI.

Why should I settle when I have Pegasus
and breasts that swan dive out of their shells?
I grew baleen to filter the nutrients from
a plankton-sea of lore. I do taste your sense, but
to feed, I must open my mouth to the ocean.

VII.

My father never sacrificed me
for favorable winds. He taught me how
to swim with my own two arms and two legs.
He lost the war, but we shared some beers.
And now I can butterfly into the sunset.

THE NEW WORLDS

As soon as your heat snaked into me
and nudged Paradise into bloom,

the heavens began their slow droop
into the world without you.

Grief and Joy are identical
twins who play games, withhold

names, holding hands, their fingers
still threaded even after they confess.

We sought the succor of moss, the squish
of mud so yielding it became dangerous.

There were a thousand decadent hours
swooning to waste in a single day.

I am a lousy pilgrim, inept
at conversions overseas. Water

beads like necklaces,
or necklaces like water,

the catch refusing to be caught
if the clutching is too clumsy.

I am become the Goddess of Waiting,
active as a skiff on a tsunami, hoping to fly

or capsize, but knowing, with chin
upraised, that for now, I am floating.

Let's kiss our way back into burrows
to spaces we share together unseen,

and speak only in dead languages
of the countries we found.

UTOPIA, PENNSYLVANIA

1.

The first temptation was the well.
Laurent wore a collared shirt,
sleeves rolled into vessels that caught
dallying hay. My hair erred, too,
confusing straw for strand.

At dusk, we prayed, leaning on augers.
Dampness gathered in the center
of my blades, under Laurent's palm.
His voice tented bowed heads. Lids,
blinking, swallowed lumps of cloth.

God is the earth. Laurent swayed,
and the wind improvised his rhythm.
Dead grass lived in his incantations.
Like all men, Laurent was a mystic
who walked half-outside of his body.

2.

When the night could no longer tell
its ends, I dreamed I was buried
alive under feathers of dirt. My lungs
dissolved, absorbing a press equal to
seven billion rose or violet petals.

Laurent, an engineer with Francophile
parents, a slender birch of a man, money
bred into hollow bird-bones that haunted
the air with every movement, slept
with face compressed, the pearl

of dreaming coalescing inside
a shelled mind, softened by silver
curls frosting a still-boyish face.
Licked clean by trauma, he glowed
with a worm's gliding divinity.

3.

Morning was darkness, to make
the most of day. We were parrot-
farmers, jostling tender bodies into
harsh imitations of labor without
depth, only a practice just begun,

a kind of living we knew but did
not yet understand. I was tired
before I was tired. We struck
water. The mud, a heaviness
bubbling up, too proud to be lifted.

4.

In the Old World, I resisted
colorful cereals and lamination.
There was a contrast in my profile
set in relief against buff fabric stapled
to wooden frames with honeycomb

cores. In winter, the grass, too, was
the color of manila folders. Spring
introduced irregularities. Laurent's
mouth bloomed in the heat; I would
hesitate before stifling the swell.

Only the fire discoursed at night.
We were never apart. There was nothing
to say. *I think we were looking*
for something... I started a sentence.
Laurent looked up from Thoreau.

5.

The first time I saw him, a meeting
of departments, his arm cocked,
resting on a flimsy wall that fell when
he scratched his nose. How he blinked
down at the toppled partition, smiled,

shrugged, a little laugh unspooling.
Well, that was awkward, wasn't it?
He moved like he could have been
dancing. I helped him restore the cubicle.
These kinds of things happen to everyone.

The air had a floral texture. Life crowded
all around me, and I saw more in one
second than I had in thirty years.
Laurent's body beckoned with the alien
chatter and fragrance of a rainforest.

6.

We became addicted to the vast new
plains inside our skulls, doors opening
up into doors. We contrived an eternal
escape: the farm, off the grid, a straitjacket
we could never work our way out of.

Toiling with questions the earth would
answer for us, we conceived a world
and three children. But first, we
needed to braid our bodies together
and weave the sky back into the ground.

7.

Laurent makes his own lip balm
from beeswax. He sketches plans
for tree houses. He reads comic books
in the bathroom. He sings gospel
music in the mornings. He is a runner

for a few weeks in the spring, then
again for a few weeks in the fall.
Laurent's hair gains mass in the rain.
When he reads parts of the newspaper
aloud, he uses a voice he imagines is

something like FDR's and clenches
an invisible cigarette holder in-between
his teeth. He kills tomatoes and resurrects
basil. He cannot use a hammer without
bruising his thumb and cursing God.

A MAP OF THE LINE OF VOLCANOES SLEEPING UNDERNEATH THE SEA BETWEEN WALLIS AND FUTUNA

1.

Fog layers of gauze a ghost a hand a green mountain with wrinkles of snow
the tentative hand a dune of breath before pellets of unformed earth
spewed into the womb of sky the fire that pokes through the fabric
of air from another dimension where everything is enunciated we see
for a moment that everything floats on a sea that sculpts ash from
flesh eyes shadows under eaves the volcano is dormant not dead
it waits they wait one stirs the other shuffling shifting groaning
like old women at the opening of the day you can live your life
beside a volcano and never see it erupt you can call your volcano
a mountain and be justified and even if ejecta deny the mountain's
steady slope how will you survive to change unless you knew in the time
of snow-capped sleep that the heart of the mountain was molten

2.

I knew my body was foreign that it lived in another place
that there could be lapses in communication up the stairs
both feet on each step before ascending to the next I knew
I could be betrayed the body does not perceive the ground
the body must ask the body must trust the mind does not
trust I have fallen more than once some people's bodies
sing mine lays tracks with disenfranchised men planning
their strike they have every right I have not learned how
to listen my fumbling made me undesirable a white ant
spotted on a freshly painted wall how could that be there
how could she not have learned to forget there were things
living in the basement that will crawl out sometimes but do
not matter unless they eat away the wood and then we poison
them under a tent because what kills the insects can also kill us

3.

To disprove the self you first must have an idea of the self
something invented you refuse to believe because it is invented
or think you can prove because it can't be disproved or make
more manageable by claiming it is fluid and unmanageable I
will point to the Western honey bee with its black snout
and tarp-eyes and sensitive fur unifying segmented legs
not only as a call to action but to love a bee close-up
resembles a tiger-striped puppy bees sting puppies
bite wings mapped with lines like fingerprints colorless close
to rainbow a hum a purr a percussive beat to the sunshine
a crunch in the potato salad a red welt on the arm
amber oozing transparent golden lava

4.

To find you I had to learn first that I was a vampire
and a daisy that I could live past knowing and still think
that I could not make you if I tried that even the chicken pox
scar on your left cheek was a pleasant surprise that I could
hate you and still lay my body's makeshift tracks for you not
that you would ever let me which is how there is a self in being
selfless that disappointment is a speech to be listened to that
there is a difference between being and accepting that I
wouldn't have to close my eyes and pretend to be here
because I was here with you and it was better than anyone
could have ever told me.

THE FOOL'S COMPROMISE

I never wanted to be a poet,
a bell-sleeved dweller in church bell-towers,
a tulip-watcher, an unbearable
chameleon of sympathy, wit
of bitterness and atrophy of hours,
lace collar lampooned and unwearable
with the itch and flair of excess. I could
not even be a savior or renegade,
impassioned by locked doors and wandering,
urging inmates to cut a key of *good*
after my own conjuring. No, I've made
ukuleles from vines and pondering
all because I love the twang and the tune.
I'm the fool who kisses dreams into bloom.

UNDISCOVERED

It's not an easy task, raising a simple man
 from the level of an ass-herd to an Amir,
 but Raha had read and memorized more
 than 20,000 poems, and words can steer

the falcon of fortune. She advised Ahmad
 to sell their asses, buy a horse, and practice
 the art of composing verse. Her ink-tipped
 lips blew doors into being, off the axis,

and Ahmad liked the tremors that lingered.
 So when they came to the Sultan's court,
 his wife posed as his brother, and one horse
 birthed an entire herd. Raha, the main support

in their poetic trade, recited a couplet
 so stirring the Sultan immediately retired
 to his harem. Raha and Ahmad, too,
 sloughed new costumes for old disguises, fired

by the success of lies not tipped with barbs,
 just glittering with unmelting ice. Wife
 and husband, these brothers, had children
 who cavorted through palace halls, rife

with echoes. In a city of slaves, four more
 nameless bodies did not exist, and their stories
 of a man who was a woman who was a poet
 did not have to be heard or believed. Glories

stalked the eloquent pair until the Sultan
 granted them a palace of their own, and
 these two legendary court-poets possessed
 legions of horses. All of the rest

is not history. The lovers were never
discovered. The lines they wrought
so cleverly could not be distilled
from the dust. Truths never sought

may go uncovered. Raha was Rahim
who is now no one. But, wait—squint
your eyes, tilt your head. There, in
the distance, a flickering inside a glint.

They are moving together, Raha
and Ahmad, warming ears with soft,
close-pressed words. I know you can
see them, winding in sheets that waft

like seaweed foam. Hear the wind
chimes of their laughter, the grace of their sleep
when cupped together like halves of a shell—
until startled by bounding children who heap

themselves heedlessly across their parents'
bed, burrowing behind backs, under limbs,
fingers seeking exposed tender spots, squeals,
the light that, when you close your eyes, never dims.

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